

Tip of the



Prevention information from The Western Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies

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Faith-Based Initiative

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The media's recent spotlight on the role of the faith community in social action programs offers an opportunity to review the faith community's role in substance abuse prevention. Three key issues prevention providers should be mindful of include the function of faith-based organizations as providers of prevention services, the role of spirituality in prevention, and the appropriateness of specific religious beliefs in prevention programs.

Formally and informally, faith-based organizations have provided prevention services and programs such as after-school, mentoring, parenting, and alternative activity programs. In that bonding to the community is a protective factor, the logic of providing these services and programs through faith-based organizations is consistent with the risk and protective factor model. Additionally, faith-based organizations provide opportunities for youth to bond with positive adult role models. Finally, in many communities and subcultures, faith-based organizations are a central organizing force and its leaders may be extremely influential in the community. Clearly, faith-based organizations can and should continue to provide prevention services and programs. Often, as organizational members of community coalitions, faith-based organizations offer a

unique perspective in the comprehensive prevention program planning process. While spirituality has been accepted as a component of substance abuse treatment for a long time, it is not often discussed in the prevention field. Some people are uncomfortable with incorporating spirituality in prevention because of the association with religious beliefs. However, in the tradition of 12-step recovery programs (i.e., Alcoholics Anonymous), spirituality refers to a belief in a power greater than that of the individual. For many people, God is that "Higher Power." For others, it is represented by something more tangible, such as the group. Regardless of the individual's belief, an essential component of spirituality in 12-step recovery is acceptance of the fact that one cannot control other people and events. Therefore, the only logical course of action is to work on improving one's own thinking and behavior. When seen in this conceptualization, spirituality may be less threatening. However, the fact that spirituality is not "science-based" and may be seen as infringing on personal belief systems may generate controversy if it is a component of prevention programs.

In the near future, there will continue to be many opportunities for the substance abuse prevention field to enhance partnerships with faith-based organizations that are influential in the community and that have the capacity to increase the protective factors affecting youth. Trepidation regarding entering the arena where spirituality and religious beliefs are prominent should not deter efforts at collaboration. Our own experience is that the faith community and other community-based prevention organizations share a common mission with regard to substance abuse prevention. That is the essential first step in an effective working relationship.

The six regional CAPTs are funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. For more information on this Tip of the CAPT or other WestCAPT services, please visit our web site: www.unr.edu/westcapt or our best practices website: www.open.org/westcapt.

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